

“And when He drew near and saw the city He wept over it.... They will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

Please listen to the words of today’s collect. “Let thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of thy humble servants; and, that they may obtain their petitions, make them to ask such things as shall please thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord.” We appeal for mercy. Later, following the confession, you will hear the Comfortable Words. In the quotation from St. John’s Epistle we hear, “If any man sin we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.”

Last week, the front page center article in a local paper was headlined, “Pride and Progress.” One might hope that the article would expound on an improved economic outlook or a community that has developed a garden area to share. In the secular press, we can be confident it would not be a story on bringing more people to Christ, and that confidence would be well-placed.

It was none of these. The article was celebrating the so-called advancement of members of the homosexual community – even to include the description of a celebration of commitment at a large church with 250 people present.

If this article had been a description of how someone had embezzled a hundred thousand dollars and took pride in the fact he had made it beyond the statute of limitations, or moved to an island nation with no legal agreements with the U.S., how might you feel reading that? Or how about a family that took pride in the fact they made life so miserable for a family of an ethnic minority that the latter family moved out of the neighborhood? Would these be events to be praised?

Sad to say, but there is a sense in many circles that “What is good for me is good indeed.” That is the substance of some people’s morality. You can find some of them in prisons, some in law enforcement, some running corporate operations, large and small, and some are church leaders too. All of this flies in the face of Biblical truth, but we too often turn the page and reckon the latest story has no effect on me personally. We ignore all this madness at our peril.

Imagine if Jesus drew nigh to a community taking pride in such events. Might he weep over such a city as he did over Jerusalem? We know that Jesus is sympathetic, willing to forgive, but He forgives those who repent. Arbitrarily changing the rules is not repentance: it is arrogance of an astonishing degree. It’s nothing new, but after all these generations, you would think people would learn: learn at least to not to celebrate their misdeeds. It began with Eve – or rather the serpent. After Eve told the serpent that God said they must not even touch the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden, the serpent tried to change the rules. He simply said, “It’s not true. You won’t die: your eyes will be opened.” The rest is history.

We find similar stories throughout the ages. God makes the rules, and someone comes along with a better idea, and it was not Mr. Ford. Nehemiah describes the phenomenon at being stiff-necked as the people “presumptuously did not obey...but sinned.” They made new rules for themselves, but not without comment from the prophet. The prophet, Zephaniah, gives especially heated warnings to Jerusalem, because, “She listens to no voice, she accepts no correction....Her prophets are wanton, faithless men; her priests profane what is sacred...” Remind you of anything in our time?

People bandy the word, prophetic, with abandon, and they are usually suggesting that it means looking to the future, looking for modern interpretation. I suggest that as one reads the prophets, one sees a recalling. The prophets are persistently recalling people to the truth, to God’s commands. If you read the promise of the future in the prophets, you will find it rather frightening: the prophets were constantly warning people what would happen if they did not recall God’s commands. They were most certainly not making new rules.

Last week's daily office directed us to reading Blessed Paul in his epistle to the Romans. It is certainly unwise to read the first chapter without caution – if not trepidation – in light of the constant news of people celebrating new rules. Paul acknowledges that he is obliged to wise and foolish people, obliged to preach the gospel. However, he advises, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth." When people make new rules in contradiction to God's, they are suppressing the truth, are they not? If the new rule contradicts God's rule, it is not true. Make no mistake about it, changing God's rule is wicked.

Paul continues to say that such wickedness is "without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...." Falling into sin is something we humans do. We can recognize the weakness, the sin, the falling, and we can confess with intention to repent – that is change. It is the height of arrogance to say, instead, we have found a better way, a superior knowledge, and, by the way, the old rule is gone, it was invalid. In the Comfortable Words, we did not hear that "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He will organize a change in the rules!" No, "He is the propitiation for our sins."

When someone, some news story, some school, some government tells you that the rule has changed, that we will be proud as we progress, you should compare the new rule with God's. If the new rule contravenes God's, I suggest you stand back and avoid the carnage that will inevitably ensue.

At the end of today's Gospel we read, "And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, saying to them, 'It is written, My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.'" When the Lord comes to visit, we should hope it will be to a house of prayer where we sinners repent and try to follow – not change – the rules God gives us.